

“It will grow muddy for want of motion”: Interpretations of Fixing the English Language in *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Rasselas*

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English

In the eighteenth century, English society was embroiled in the debate as to whether their language should continue to grow uninhibited or should be limited, or fixed, to only the words used by proper society. Followers of the theory of fixing the language as it currently stood had a model in the *Académie Française* of France, which dictated what words should be accepted into the French language. On the other side of the debate, many believed the language of the English should be without guidance and, for these critics, the acceptance of all neologisms and slang represented a fundamental feature of British society: the liberty of its people. Two figures amidst this great controversy of the time were Jonathan Swift and Samuel Johnson. Whereas Swift wrote in his *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1712) that there was a pressing need to fix the English language before it became corrupted over time, Johnson realized through the process of compiling his great *Dictionary* (1755) that society needs to accept the fluidity and growth of a living language.

In addition to being proponents of the language debate, both men wrote works relating to the travels of individuals seeking enlightenment who find the human conditions of corruption and greed persist throughout the world. Swift’s masterpiece, *Gulliver’s Travels*, is memorable for its acerbic take on humanity and its flaws, while Johnson’s *The History of Rasselas*, is superficially a morality tale, but in reality, presents a world as corrupt and depraved as that of Swift. Each of these texts includes a protagonist, Lemuel Gulliver in one and Imlac in the other, who often functions as a vehicle through which the author is able to express his beliefs, whether explicit or subtle, on all matters of life, including issues concerning language and its relation to society. Language works as a passport to gain acceptance into foreign cultures and both Gulliver and Rasselas come to radically different conclusions concerning language and its significance. The multilingual Gulliver travels across the foreign lands of the world, yet he concludes his journey with the assumption that the simple and fixed language of the Houyhnhnms, analogous to proper English, is superior to all others.

By contrast, Johnson’s discussion, primarily through the character of Imlac, concerns poetry as all-encompassing in its focus and the irrational tradition of embalming the dead, themes that provide a response to Swift’s more conservative views on language by emphasizing the need for variety in life. As Imlac himself proclaims, “Do not suffer life to stagnate; it will grow muddy for want of motion: commit yourself again to the current of the world”(85). Here, Imlac is consoling Nekayah, Rasselas’s sister, who has sunk her life into despair by mourning the death of her friend, Pekuah, but the words have a greater value for Johnson—one should not let language “grow muddy” and stagnate. Rather, language and all other aspects of life are subject to the “current of the world” and one must accept the motion of human existence. Through an examination of the primary

documents of both authors and application of their views of language to their respective texts, one can better understand the relationship between nationalism and language that permeates travel literature during the time of British expansion. Moreover, the implications of interactions and acceptance of other cultures relate to the greater notion of language not stagnating, or as Imlac notes “[growing] muddy for want of motion,” but necessarily growing and changing over time.

The debate as to whether the English language should be fixed or not raged amongst the literary circles and courts of Great Britain for many years prior to Swift submitting his proposal to Robert Harley, Lord High Treasurer to the Queen. Indeed, the fear that foreign influences are corrupting one’s language has existed as long as language has existed. Purists have always assumed the worst of any change concerning the mother tongue, particularly when it involves the words they deem vulgar or low. Nicholas Hudson, a critic who rightly believes Johnson’s dictionary was more inclusive of “cant” terms than Gwin Kolb and others had previously assumed, notes that the history of correcting the language can be traced back to the classic rhetorician, Quintillian, who believes a nation’s language should be the “agreed practice of educated men”(80). From this Classical vision of a learned group deeming which words are proper or not came grammarians in the eighteenth century who “looked back nostalgically to a time of greater elegance and stable aristocratic power”(80). Here, Hudson points out the symbiotic relationship between a country and its language; many scholars of the time assumed that a fixed language would be stronger and more befitting to England’s imperial growth. Ann Cline Kelly, a major scholar on Swift and language, reiterates this aspect of language when she writes, “the possibilities of achieving a stable, standard language...[was] the *sine qua non* of a great, strong nation”(Swift’s Satire 34). For adherents to the need to fix and correct the English language, the best means to accomplish these goals would be by creating an English academy, modeled after Cardinal Richelieu’s Académie Française.

The notion of an academy of learned men dictating the rules and regulations of the English tongue was established many years prior to Swift’s call-to-arms to fix the language. Once Charles II ascended the throne and the British kingdom was restored to its former power, interest in an English academy grew. Indeed, the nation’s fascination with France helped heighten the supposed need for the management of the language via the method of the French. Scholar B.S. Monroe explains that “after the recall of Charles II, writers seeking court favor turned more and more to French literature and French ideals”(109). As the French were influencing all aspects of life, it is not surprising that their approach to correcting and fixing the language would be a “means of improvement” for the English (109). The Royal Society noted this fervent desire for a learned group to manage the language and “appointed a committee on the improvement of the English tongue” in 1664. Although this committee ultimately failed in its intention to control the language as the French had, its membership included a number of major literary figures. Among these famous writers was John Dryden, whom Monroe notes believed in the need for such a prescriptive group: “I have endeavored to write English, as near as I could distinguish it from the tongues of pendants, and that of affected travellers (sic). I am sorry, that (speaking so noble a language as we do) we have not a more certain measure of it, as they have in France”(113). Here, Dryden’s comments relate implicitly to the writer’s dilemma of how to pen stories in a language so inconsistent and variable in its

words and meanings with no reliable dictionary from which to work. Henry Hitchings, author of *Defining the World*, relates that Johnson's *Dictionary* was a necessity of the times: "The need for a new English dictionary was...a matter of both national prestige and philological necessity" (55). As literary figures of the age sought a dictionary to stabilize the language, many, such as Daniel Defoe, believed the institution of an Academy would be beneficial to matters of "national prestige." Defoe is best known for his adventure novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, yet Monroe points out that his *Essays on Projects*, published in 1697, asserts the need for the English nation to have a means of fixing the language: "The English tongue is not at all less worthy the labour of such a society than the French, and capable of much greater perfection"(114). For Jonathan Swift, the solution to Dryden and Defoe's fears of linguistic corruption was the establishment of an English academy that would correct and improve the English tongue so as to assist all writers, including himself, in achieving posterity.

As Dryden, Defoe, Alexander Pope and other authors sought a systematic language as their medium of expression, so too did Swift urge the English nation to "correct" his direct means of communication and his livelihood: language. In 1712, Swift published *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue*, which had its origins in a letter to Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford and Mortimer and Lord High Treasurer. Although one could possibly read this document as a satiric stab at the ridiculous linguistic concerns of the nation, similar to his *A Modest Proposal* (1729), Monroe explains how a simple, yet significant piece of evidence suggests otherwise: "This is the only one of his publications to which Swift attached his own name" (117). Since the majority of Swift's writing was anonymous, it is logical to conclude that a document he signed under his own name must discuss a topic very important to him. Here, Swift is not assuming a persona to present his views, but rather puts forth his own beliefs concerning the need to fix the English language.

Swift begins to develop his views about the corruption of the language and the means to improve it by noting how the English tongue continues to decay: "Our Language is extremely imperfect...its daily Improvements are by no means in proportion to its daily Corruptions" (8). As Swift finds fault in the lack of "Improvements" in the language, he cites the Restoration, the period when Monroe believes proposals such as Swift's reached their apex in influence, as one of the chief reasons why the language is in a state of decline. Swift states, "Licentiousness which entered with the *Restoration*, and from infecting our Religion and Morals, fell to corrupt our Language" (18). Here, Swift provides a clear association between politics and language—as the morality of the nation reaches a state of decay, so too does the language erode from poor use. In addition to political corruption, the state of literature also leads to the downfall of proper English, according to Swift: "The Plays, and other Compositions...[were] filled with a succession of affected Phrases, and new, conceited Words, either borrowed from the current Style of the Court, or from those who, under the Character of Men of Wit and Pleasure, pretended to give the Law"(20). As plays and other works filter into society, Swift notes, the cant terms of the people also permeate the English tongue: "If [a term] struck the present Taste, it was soon transferred into the Plays and current Scribbles of the Week, and became an addition to our Language" (20). Here, Swift maps the progression of words from the streets and coffee houses inhabited by pretenders of Wit (men Swift clearly despises) to becoming additions to the Language and are made legitimate as a result.

Once Swift describes in his letter the corruptions of the language, he goes on to provide what he believes is the solution: the English Academy. Swift writes that “a free judicious Choice should be made of such Persons, as are generally allowed to be best qualified for such a Work...should assemble at some appointed Time and Place, and fix on Rules by which they design to proceed”(29). As Swift sets the guidelines for his vision of a learned society, he also notes what such a group would accomplish: “They will find many Words that deserve to be utterly thrown out of our Language, many more to be corrected; and perhaps not a few, long since antiquated, which ought to be restored, on account of their Energy and Sound” (31). This passage speaks to larger issues than simply fixing the language. Here, he advocates the need to not only discard words deemed unacceptable by Swift, but also to “restore” obsolete terms to their rightful place in the lexicon. Swift’s desire to give life to the dead is a significant aspect of his discussion of language in *Gulliver’s Travels* and Johnson’s rebuttal in his *Preface* and subsequent works.

In addition to Swift’s hope to resurrect obsolete terms, his use of the word “restore” has political connotations. As he addressed this letter to the Earl of Oxford, who was then the Lord High Treasurer for Queen Anne, the term is fraught with meaning in relation to the Royalty reclaiming their throne and “restoring” balance in Britain. Swift asserted, “it is better a Language should not be wholly perfect, than that it should be perpetually changing” (31). Here, Swift appeared to neglect the reality of living languages, such as English—they must necessarily change and transform in order to survive over time. In addition, Swift presented his Tory views concerning his fear of change and staunch belief in tradition for all aspects of society, especially in regards to a limited language. Indeed, Swift proclaimed that simplicity, a term that recurs frequently in *Gulliver’s Travels*, “is one of the greatest Perfections of any Language” (32-3). Near the conclusion of Swift’s letter, he issued an ultimatum to the Queen: “If you will not take some Care to settle our Language, and put it into a state of Continuance, I cannot promise that your Memory shall be preserved above an hundred Years, further than by imperfect Tradition” (40). In Swift’s final plea for correcting the language, he assumed that the language was changing so rapidly, all writing of his period would be made obsolete within “an hundred Years.” One will find this particular anxiety of Swift appears multiple times in his text, particularly in relation to unintelligibility and concepts of immortality. Swift’s worrying that the members of the royal family will no longer have their accomplishments “preserved” speaks also to his own fears of posterity; if people cannot understand his writing, he will no longer be able to live forever via the printed word.

As Swift’s anxieties concerning the English language appear to stem directly from his concerns of corruption, political instability and his own posterity being in jeopardy, he assumes that a simple and limited language corrected by an English academy of sorts will be best for the nation of England. A figure appears, however, who completely dismisses Swift’s theories and whose dicta, as Monroe describes it, “put an end to the discussion for many years to come” (122). That man was the exceptional scholar and lexicographer, Samuel Johnson. Johnson realized the flaws in Swift’s assumptions of language and how humans can control it. His great *Dictionary* presented what many could deem a “fixing” of the English language, yet this assertion would be entirely inaccurate. Rather than dictating what words people should use and how they should

speak (a prescriptive dictionary), Johnson assembled one of the earliest descriptive dictionaries that recorded the words used by the British people. Johnson's *Dictionary* became the preeminent guide to the English language and, in eighteenth century England, was known as simply the *Dictionary*. It was only during the course of compiling his dictionary, however, that Johnson shifted away from a prescriptivist and conservative mindset concerning language to his eventual acceptance and inclusion of a variety of terms, both proper and cant.

Johnson's earliest writings on the English language appear in 1747 in the form of *The Plan for a Dictionary of the English Language*. Addressed to the Earl of Chesterfield—a prominent figure whom Johnson futilely attempted to have patronize his work—Johnson's *Plan* puts forth his views on how he should assemble a dictionary. Among Johnson's proposal of action, he discusses orthography and, in particular, the wickedness of change: "All change is of itself an evil, which ought not to be hazarded but for evident advantage; and as inconstancy is in every case a mark of weakness, it will add nothing to the reputation of our tongue"(36). Here, Johnson appears optimistic about his ability to correct and essentially fix the English language through his dictionary. He supports this prescriptivist inclination in regards to spelling in his discussion of etymology and cant terms when he writes, "we shall secure our language from being overrun with *cant*, from being crouded with low terms, the spawn of folly or affectation, which arise from no just principles of speech, and of which therefore no legitimate derivation can be shown" (42). In this passage, Swift seems to be penning the words of Johnson, as the lexicographer's disgust for low terms mirrors that of Swift in his *Proposal*. Indeed, Johnson has a complex relationship with Swift, who is his elder and one of the "English Poets" whom he includes in his illustrative quotations in his *Dictionary*, yet the lexicographer denigrates Swift in the majority of his writings concerning language, particularly in his *Preface* to the *Dictionary*.

Johnson's *Dictionary* was published in 1755, and, after eight years had elapsed since his *Plan*, the lexicographer had a very different conception of cant terms and what should and should not appear in a dictionary of the English language. The *Preface* that precedes the dictionary itself speaks to Johnson's shift to a more descriptivist mentality. Johnson writes, "the words which our authours have introduced by their knowledge of foreign languages, or ignorance of their own, by vanity or wantonness, by compliance with fashion, or lust of innovation, I have registred as they occurred"(85). Here, Johnson clearly dismisses these neologisms, yet he still chooses to record them "as they occurred." Thus, while Johnson does not accept these words as equal in moral and cultural value, he nonetheless includes them in his dictionary. Donald T. Siebert, a Johnsonian scholar, clarifies this aspect when he notes that "in a living language there is no possibility of establishing the best families and a Burke's Peerage" (486). Although Johnson had the greatest expectation of excluding vulgar terms, he came to the conclusion that he must include a great number of offensive terms without a high pedigree or etymology.

Further, Siebert explains that for the lexicographer "the offense or risibility proceeds from inappropriate use, not the inherent unworthiness or absurdity of any individual word" (494). Siebert recognizes that Johnson's very choice to include terms often deemed offensive or lewd, even according to the author himself, portrays how descriptivist the dictionary was for its time. Indeed, Johnson himself realizes the folly of

his prescriptivist views and makes the analogy between his previous goals and the hopes of embalming the dead:

When we see men grow old and die at a certain time one after another...we laugh at the elixir that promises to prolong life to a thousand years; and with equal justice may the lexicographer be derided, who being able to produce no example of a nation that has preserved their words and phrases from mutability, shall imagine his dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it from corruption and decay, that it is in his power to change sublunary nature and clear the world at once from folly, vanity, and affectation. (104-5)

From this lengthy passage, Johnson clearly understands the error in his ways and recognizes the mutability of a living language by likening the practices of fixing the language to attempting to embalm that which must necessarily die. Later, he responds to theories of language academies, such as the *Académie Française*, and condemns these groups for their delusions regarding language. He proclaims, “sounds are too volatile and subtle for legal restraints; to enchain syllables, and to lash the wind, are equally the undertakings of pride” (105). Here, Johnson focuses on the freedom of language and its inability to be fettered in the same way that the wind cannot be “lashed.” One of the reasons language cannot be restrained is its growth through neologisms.

As Swift assumes slang and vulgar terms need to be excised from the English language, Johnson understands the need for them and how they will continue to flourish, while older terms will become obsolete regardless of any arbitrary restrictions an English academy would place upon them. Johnson explains, “as any custom is disused, the words that expressed it must perish with it; as any opinion grows popular, it will innovate speech in the same proportion as it alters practice” (106). Johnson’s comprehension of the vacillating nature of language—when it discards older terms, it gives birth to new ones—again illustrates a key difference between himself and the conservative Swift.

Jonathan Swift appears by name in Johnson’s *Preface* and, as a featured “English Poet,” Swift becomes an important opponent for Johnson in his indictment of the need to fix the English language. Johnson writes of Swift in his *Lives of the English Poets* and, though he includes the author, he is not kind to the subject of the biography. Johnson condemns Swift’s notion of an English academy, modeled on the French, and notes, “the certainty and stability which, contrary to all experience, he thinks attainable, he proposes to secure by instituting an academy...which, being renewed by successive elections, would in a short time have differed from itself”(253). Here, Johnson focuses on the element of absurdity in having an English academy: it will become corrupt in the same manner as every other English institution. Johnson previously describes Swift’s *Proposal* by name in his *Preface* and writes, “Swift, in his petty treatise on the *English* language, allows that new words must sometimes be introduced, but proposes that none should be suffered to become obsolete” (107). Johnson derides this viewpoint and proclaims, “how shall [an obsolete word] be continued, when it conveys an offensive idea, or recalled again into the mouths of mankind, when it has once become unfamiliar by disuse, and unpleasing by unfamiliarity”(108). Johnson, here, argues that, similar to the corpses the lexicographer seeks to embalm, the bodies of the past must be left in the ground; having them rise up again is “unfamiliar” and “unpleasing” to those who do not remember the

dead. While Swift seeks the resurrection of the deceased, possibly in relation to his obsession with posterity in his *Proposal*, Johnson recognizes the absurdity of such a premise and notes that perhaps the obsolete words reached that state of “death” because they were no longer of use to modern society. Thus, while Johnson places emphasis on the liberty of the English nation and its need for an unfettered language, Swift puts forth the view that simplicity is best and fixing the English tongue will lead to the betterment of society as a whole.

Swift’s anxieties concerning immortality and the corruption of the English language play a significant role in his discussion of language and nationalism in one of his most celebrated works, *Gulliver’s Travels*. Johnson writes of Swift’s text in his biography and proclaims in a pessimistic tone, “no rules of judgment were applied to a book written in open defiance of truth and regularity” and “the part...which gave the most disgust must be the history of the Houyhnhnms”(261). Here, Johnson registers his dislike of the novel, but he concedes that it was very popular when it was first published and won Swift enormous fame and respect. It is especially fascinating that Johnson notes his disgust for the Houyhnhnms, characters who have a limited language of “simplicity,” and their history. While Johnson greatly abhors both Swift’s text and Swift himself, the lexicographer’s tale of the Prince of Abissinia making his “choice of life” consistently parallels the character of Gulliver and his adventures. Although, as Alvin Whitley points out, “Imlac is not Samuel Johnson in the same way that Gulliver is not Jonathan Swift”(51), one can still read the characters as instruments through which the authors discuss language. One of the most important ways this theme functions in either text is that language is analogous to a passport that grants the protagonists access to the worlds of the unknown.

In the works of both Johnson and Swift, the subject of communication in the human world is of the utmost significance. Swift’s Lemuel Gulliver is a multilingual character whose wanderlust leads him to absorb many new languages during his travels. Indeed, Gulliver is adept at learning the native tongues of others, and appears predisposed to this condition from an early age: “When I was ashore, [I spent my leisure time] in observing the Manners and Dispositions of the People, as well as learning their Language; wherein I had a great Facility by the Strength of my Memory”(16). Here, Gulliver’s “Strength” of memory enables him to assume and understand a great variety of languages. When Gulliver attempts to converse with the Lilliputians, he “spoke to them in as many Languages as [he] had the least Smattering of, which were *High and Low Dutch, Latin, French, Spanish, Italian, and Lingua Franca*”(26). Swift emphasizes the enormous repertoire of languages Gulliver has at his disposal to help explain how Gulliver assimilates into the multitude of cultures he visits so rapidly. Gulliver’s average time for learning a new language is “about three Weeks”(28), which is remarkable considering the difficulty most have in understanding one language, let alone the variety Gulliver learns in the text. The protagonist’s methods for apprehending native tongues vary as well. Swift gives examples of linguistic learning ranging from Gulliver writing down columns to translate foreign terms to the protagonist having his nurse, Glumdalclitch, teach him the words of the Brobdingnags in Book Two. From these means by which Gulliver learns the languages, and thus the culture, of the people he meets, Swift depicts the significance of language in all societies, including that of England.

Whereas Swift's protagonist is able to learn and understand the native tongues of others almost instantaneously, Johnson's characters in *Rasselas* portray a more accurate representation of how people apprehend new languages. When Prince Rasselas leaves the idyllic Happy Valley with his guide, Imlac, and his sister and her maid to explore the outside world, he finds that he and his companions must know a nation's language before they are allowed access into that society. Imlac warns Rasselas of this aspect of travel in his narrative of his own experiences and his hope to find "variety in life" (22). Imlac's interest in knowledge and his disgust for the commerce his father desires to be his profession in life leads the guide of Rasselas to recount how he first adapted to the world outside of Abissinnia. On approaching Agra, the "capital of Indostan," Imlac realizes language is his passport to assimilation: "I applied myself to the language of the country, and in a few months was able to converse with the learned men" (23). As Imlac became aware of the power of language in any culture, he urges his companions to study the native tongue of Egypt when they enter the city of Cairo. While Imlac was able to converse with the men around him, "his companions, not being able to mix in the conversation, could make no discovery of their ignorance or surprise, and were gradually initiated in the world as they gained knowledge of the language" (42). Indeed, Johnson stresses that the group "studied the language two years" and worked diligently to comprehend the culture they were visiting. As Johnson recognizes the toil and struggle it takes to assume any language, most likely an insight gained from his work on his dictionary, Swift's notion that Gulliver can easily pick up and communicate in the language of the people he meets attests to what Johnson would deem his naïveté about all aspects of language, including the notion that it can be fixed and simplified in the manner of the native tongue of the Houyhnhnms.

Swift's choice to have Gulliver be a multilingual character who can understand multiple languages relates not only to the protagonist's adept linguistic nature, but also to heighten the fact that Gulliver ultimately chooses the language of the horses as superior to all others. As Swift believes "Simplicity is...one of the greatest Perfections in any Language" (*Proposal* 32-3), he features two cultures that uphold the need for a simple and limited language: the Brobdingnags and the Houyhnhnms. Indeed, the fact that these foreign societies are also the least corrupted ones featured in the text speaks to Swift's assumption that the power and moral integrity of a nation rests in a language of simplicity. Kelly writes of the viewpoint of the time, one with which Swift through Gulliver concurs, that "a unified and purified language is a necessary condition for a unified and purified country" ("After Eden" 33). Gulliver's description of the language of the Brobdingnags confirms the linguistic purity of the people. He states that "their Stile is clear, masculine, and smooth, but not Florid; for they avoid nothing more than multiplying unnecessary Words, or using various Expressions"(125). Here, Swift highlights the lack of excess and grandiosity in the language of the Brobdingnags. Since they do not "multiply unnecessary Words," a phrase that recalls Swift's accusations of cant terms illegitimately entering the lexicon, the Brobdingnags are the height of civility for Gulliver. As Gulliver believes the "clear, masculine, and smooth" style of the Brobdingnagian language to be representative of their incorruptible society, he finds a distinct contrast between their limited language and that of the Academy of Lagado he visits in the Third Book. Here, one might assume that Swift has envisioned the English Academy of his *Proposal*, yet the overly scientific analysis of language that results

clearly opposes Swift's desire for a simple English tongue. He notes that on papers "were written all the Words of their Language in their several Moods, Tenses, and Declensions, but without any Order" and that when turned "the whole Disposition of the Words was entirely changed" (171). Here, one finds Swift's anxieties come to fruition in the form of a language with no boundaries or limitations to keep it from changing instantaneously. After his visit to Lagado, he assumes the culture of the Brobdingnags to be one of the best he visits, until he meets the Houyhnhnms in the final book of the text.

Gulliver's adventures lead him to travel all across the world, but it is only when he becomes acquainted with the culture of the Houyhnhnms that he believes he has found a superior mode of living. In every aspect that is a part of their rational society, Gulliver finds no equal in the newly-labeled Yahoo world of which he himself is a member. He proclaims on the matter of their native tongue that "their Language doth not abound in Variety of Words, because their Wants and Passions are fewer than among us" (224). Gulliver finds the simplicity of their language, which includes no word for "evil," "love" or any other irrational aspect of human existence, to be incredibly appealing. Although one cannot assume the views of Gulliver on the Houyhnhnms are precisely those of the author, the fact that Swift claims the superiority of "Simplicity" in his writing outside of satire demonstrates one of his similarities with his protagonist. Gulliver, as the mouthpiece for Swift, explains that his translations of his Master's discussions will always be inferior in his language: "I shall hardly be able to do Justice to my Master's Arguments and Expressions, which must needs suffer by my Want of Capacity, as well as by a Translation into our barbarous *English*" (228). Here, Swift's use of the term "barbarous" in reference to English relates implicitly to his views of the corruption of the language and the necessity of its being fixed and limited.

As Gulliver loses his British nationalism and begins to abhor that which is not of the Houyhnhnms, he reflects Swift's own trepidations about proper English and the state of the language during his time. Deborah Baker Wyrick keys in on Swift's intense fears concerning the language of the Houyhnhnms when she writes, "perhaps...the Houyhnhnms represent a form of self-criticism; Swift invests them not only with the virtues of rationality and benevolence, which he undoubtedly approved of, but also with linguistic paralysis, with a denial of the sometimes unpleasant reality of historical change" (184). Wyrick's analysis of Swift and his conflicted representation of the perfection of language by the horses demonstrate the author's greater anxieties about his ability to fix the English language. Despite the fact that Gulliver appears to mimic Swift in proposing the "Virtues" of the Houyhnhnms "to the Imitation of Mankind" (262), Swift in his later years begins to recognize the troubles of such an Academy (perhaps similar to that of Lagado in Book Three). Although Swift begins to explore his fear of "linguistic paralysis" in the form of the passionless Houyhnhnms, Johnson offers a more emphatic stance against fixing the English language in his criticism of linguistic simplicity in *Rasselas*.

While the figure of Gulliver extols the virtues of a simple and limited vocabulary in one's life, Johnson's characters consider simplicity to be a form of stagnation. When Pekuah, the maid Nekayah mourns in the text, returns from being kidnapped at the Great Pyramids, she describes the conditions of an Arab harem that clearly demonstrate the torturous existence of life without conversation and variety. Pekuah is an educated woman, despite her role as a maid to the princess, and she finds the lack of knowledge

among the women of the harem upsetting. She exclaims, “for what could they be expected to talk? They had seen nothing...of what they had not seen they could have no knowledge, for they could not read” (95). In the same way that the Houyhnhnms are illiterate, the women of the harem are also unable to gain any wisdom through reading. Johnson goes further with his criticism of limited language when Pekuah explains the few terms the women knew in their lives: “They had no ideas but of the few things that were within their view, and had hardly names for any thing but their cloaths and their food”(96). Here, Johnson asserts the fact that people who lead limited lives—who cannot read and do not travel—will necessarily have limited languages. Indeed, Johnsonian scholar Robert J. Mayhew notes that Pekuah’s “lack of conversation...is because the women, true to their sensate lives, betray no curiosity in the natural world”(546). As Pekuah cannot converse with those who have no curiosity in life, she demonstrates how travel integrally relates to knowledge. For the author, the limitation of language is no positive attribute, as it is for Gulliver and the writings of Swift in his *Proposal*. Rather, Johnson believes variety in all forms of life is the key to happiness.

The author demonstrates his view that one must have diversity through Imlac’s description of a poet. In Swift’s *Proposal*, he notes that poets have “contributed very much to the spoiling of the English Tongue” (21). Imlac himself provides one of the reasons Swift might have had a grudge against poets: they seek knowledge of all aspects of life, both high and low. Imlac’s panegyric concerning poetry leads him to note that a poet “must be conversant with all that is awfully vast or elegantly little”(26). Of course, one realizes that Swift, of all people in the eighteenth century, was conversant with the bawdy side of life, but his disgust for cant terms relates to his fear that slang and neologisms can be “elegant” and made legitimate through their inclusion in dictionaries, such as that of Johnson. Indeed, Imlac’s description of the poet corresponds nicely to Johnson’s work compiling his *Dictionary*. Imlac states, “no kind of knowledge was to be overlooked” (26) and, “to a poet nothing can be useless”(26). These assessments of poetry, paralleling Johnson’s trek through the lowest cant to the most proper English terms, relate to both authors and their conceptions of language. For Johnson, the poet/author must accept variety and change as essential elements of human existence, while Swift remains obsessed with his need to gain posterity through the fixing of the English language.

Swift precedes his text with Gulliver’s letter to his cousin Sympson. In this letter, he again portrays his anxieties concerning language and unintelligibility:

I have since found that the Sea-Yahoos are apt, like the Land ones, to become new fangled in their Words; which the latter change every Year; insomuch, as I remember upon each Return to mine own Country, their old Dialect was so altered, that I could hardly understand the new. (9)

Gulliver cannot “understand the new” dialect of his own countrymen. In this way he represents Swift’s fear of not achieving posterity through his medium of expression: the English language. While the language of the Houyhnhnms epitomizes simplicity and perfection, the language of the Yahoos needs to be fixed in order for the author himself to gain immortality. Swift later portrays his anxiety of posterity when Gulliver meets the Struldbrugs of Luggnagg. Here, he finds citizens who are immortal, a dream for Gulliver

and Swift, yet the fact that they do not die does not signify that they do not age. Since the Struldbrugs live forever, they witness the damaging effects of a “Language...always upon the Flux”: “The *Struldbrugs* of one Age do not understand those of another; neither are they able after two Hundred Years to hold any conversation (farther than by a few general Words) with their Neighbours the Mortals; and thus they lye under the Disadvantage of living like Foreigners in their own Country” (198-9). Here, the concern of language remaining consistent and recognizable over time recalls Swift’s ultimatum to the Queen that if the country does not control the language of the people, the posterity of her reign (and Swift’s own immortality) will never be fixed for centuries to come.

Samuel Johnson also depicts the notion of immortality, yet he demonstrates the futility of attempting to fix a living language. In the final pages of *Rasselas*, Johnson describes the Egyptian tradition of embalming the corpses of the dead. Rasselas first asks the wise Imlac for what purpose the culture follows this custom: “What reason...can be given [as to] why the Egyptians should thus preserve those carcasses which some nations consume with fire, others lay to mingle with the earth, and all agree to remove from their sight, as soon as decent rites can be performed?” (118-9). Here, Johnson appears to be discussing not only the traditions of Egypt, but the futility of embalming what should rightfully be “removed from sight.” To Rasselas’s inquiry, Imlac replies, “had all the dead been embalmed, their repositories must in time have been more spacious than the dwellings of the living” (119). Again, Johnson appears to be using the concept of embalming to metaphorically discuss the ridiculousness of fixing a language or, even worse, bringing back to life obsolete terms. As Johnson wrote in his *Preface* about the role of the lexicographer as embalmer of the language, this metaphor has great significance to him and his discussions of language in *Rasselas*. Indeed, the fact that both authors are preoccupied with issues of language and immortality speaks to the larger need for a living language to not be embalmed, but to necessarily vacillate and transform over time.

The controversy of an English academy of language ensnared many prominent literary figures of the seventeenth century. Notable proponents on both sides of the argument for fixing the language were Jonathan Swift and Samuel Johnson. Both authors considered language to be their medium of expression and livelihood and, thus, felt the need to place their stakes in the controversy of the day. Although Swift’s view of language in his masterpiece, *Gulliver’s Travels*, illustrates his questioning the ability to control living languages as he hoped to in his *Proposal*, Johnson recognizes in his *Preface* the futility of fixing the English tongue and emphasizes the fact in *Rasselas* via his metaphors of the poet and the embalming of the dead. Both authors relate the English language to the nation and, while Swift seeks a purified language to strengthen the nation, Johnson assumes a democratic nation must have an unrestricted native tongue. For Johnson, and later descriptivists, the English language is one that will “grow muddy for want of motion” and must be as free as the nation of England itself in order to exist as a living and transforming language.

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